

### BACKGROUND

Mental health conditions such as schizophrenia, depression and anxiety are common in the United States, with more than a quarter of Americans suffering from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year. Though these disorders are widespread, the main burden of illness falls on the six percent or so of the population who suffer from a serious mental illness. Not surprisingly, mental health is a major focus for VA's healthcare system. Schizophrenia, perhaps the most devastating mental disorder, accounts for nearly 12 percent of VA's total healthcare costs each year.

### WHAT VA IS DOING

VA research in this area includes large multisite trials comparing new and existing medical or psychological treatments; lab studies that explore biological factors underlying mental illness; and research aimed at developing and testing new models of chronic care for those with serious mental illness. Highlights of current or recent research include the following:

- **Genetic discovery may lead to new schizophrenia treatment**—A team from the Denver VA discovered that a gene that codes for part of the brain's nicotine receptor is also involved with hereditary risk for schizophrenia. Subsequent work by VA scientists has helped translate this finding into a potential new treatment for the disease: a compound derived from sea worms that works like nicotine but does not have its adverse health effects. The new drug was recently approved for clinical trials.
- **Improving depression care**—A new model of depression care for older adults yields big improvements for little money, suggested a recent analysis of an earlier study involving VA and seven other health systems. In the model, nurses, social workers or psychologists work alongside primary-care physicians to educate, support and monitor patients. In the original trial, patients who received this model of care were more likely than usual-care patients to report improvements in their depression symptoms.

*For more information on VA research:*

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